

published online in *Taiwan Insights* <https://taiwaninsight.org/2020/12/07/safety-in-numbers-taiwan-in-a-post-trump-world/>

Safety in Numbers: Taiwan in a post-Trump World

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Even prior to the official start of the Trump presidency in January 2017, Taiwan has received attention from the then US President-elect Trump as he received a congratulatory telephone call from President Tsai Ing-Wen. That phone call was heard around the world as it broke ranks with the usual quiet approaches of the past. The next four years showed the Trump administration 'talking up' and actively engaging with Taiwan while 'talking down' and confrontational to China, e.g., the trade war, South China Seas, etc. Taiwan finally felt that there is a US president willing to take their side. Indeed, *Taipei Times* on October 19 reported that a YouGov survey showing Taiwan is alone in Asia-Pacific where majority of the respondents are favorable to Republican Donald Trump than to Democrat Joe Biden. With the now concluded US presidential election won by Joe Biden with 306 electoral college votes and the most votes ever (over 80 million) by a winning presidential candidate in US history, many are scrambling to read the tea leaves for what it means for Taiwan.

It is important to be reminded that US-Taiwan relations is built on the foundation of an American law – the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (TRA). This is a unique law as it defines the United States' multifaceted commitment to Taiwan. TRA has remained the bedrock of US-Taiwan relations that has underpinned Taiwan's security and stability despite its increasing formal diplomatic isolation in the global stage. TRA, I argue, does not only define US-Taiwan relations, but equally important, has also outlined the nature of US-China relations and cross-Straits relations. So, despite the public perception of the seeming ups and downs of US-Taiwan relations in the past 40 years, the reality is the US-Taiwan relations is stable and strong.

So what can Taiwan expect from the Biden administration? First things first, the erratic, disjointed, go-it-alone, 'America First' nature of US foreign policy is out. As an old hand in foreign affairs himself, Biden has signaled – with his cabinet appointments for foreign affairs and national security – that a more nuanced, consultative, and more deliberative foreign policy will be the norm. Taiwan might feel some 'withdrawal symptoms' from the 'sugar-high' four years of the Trump presidency as the US will play the Taiwan card less obviously and less

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explicitly. The hullabaloo in US-Taiwan relations under Trump will quiet down markedly but it does not mean that Taiwan has become less important. Taiwan, after all, is an important part of the first island chain in the US Indo-Pacific security strategy.

Let us remind ourselves of the three grand strategies of American foreign policy – neo-isolationism, liberal internationalism, and American primacy. The third strategy – American primacy – is not questioned across US presidential administrations. The tumultuous past four years is an example of clumsy neo-isolationist experimentation. In a president Biden, we can expect a collective approach that underpins the liberal internationalism strategy. That is, effective American leadership is an invitation to collective action. American allies and partners in the region, therefore, can expect to be called upon to act collectively to manage, deal, and confront regional political, security, economic, and environmental issues.

The more successful the Biden administration is in leading from the front and bringing along regional allies, the stronger and more stable the collective security (in a broad sense) community will be. This commitment to multilateralism of the future Biden administration is not only in the security sphere but also the commitment to multilateral organizations as well as to the WTO and the free-trade regime. As a trade-dependent state, Taiwan will benefit from renewed American engagement in multilateralism, especially in regional and global trade arrangements, as it finds itself locked out of the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and still unable to make headway in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Yes, Taiwan will feel less ‘in the news’ but it does not equate to being ‘left out in the cold.’ Instead, Taiwan should interpret Biden’s belief in leadership through collective action and multilateralism as an even clearer statement of the stability and reliability of US commitment to its allies and partners (including Taiwan, of course).

Within the US, there is a strong bipartisan consensus that China is a systemic challenger to American global primacy. While the incoming Biden administration will be more nuanced in managing Sino-US relations, China will not find respite from US pressure to hold it accountable. There will be no backtracking there. One very likely difference between the Trump and Biden approaches is that there will be better ‘buy-in’ from allies and partners as the US leads in coordinated and collective efforts to hold China accountable, consequently, reducing China’s ability to drive a wedge between US and its allies.

Cross-straits relations is likely to remain unchanged as it is primarily driven by domestic electoral politics in Taiwan and internal party politics in China. China’s stubborn insistence on its version of one-China policy and Taiwan’s adamant refusal to accede – assisted by events in Hong Kong and supported by even stronger Taiwanese identity – ensures that cross-Straits relations remain ‘cold’ and ‘tense.’ To the extent that Sino-US relations affects cross-Straits relations in a Biden administration depends on i) how China reacts to more coordinated US-led efforts to hold it to account; and ii) the propensity and appetite of the US to

play the so-called 'Taiwan card.' In any event, as a frontline state Taiwan can expect that pressure from the PRC is unlikely to abate anytime soon thereby ensuring 'cold' and 'tense' cross-Strait relations to continue. However, Biden's commitment to rebuilding alliance relations – weakened by Trump's 'America First' of the past four years – means that Taiwan is more likely to feel the 'warmth' of the collective security blanket provided by a stable and reliable US-led regional security and economic framework.